

Lofgren Calls on President Bush to Protect Human Rights in Vietnam

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Washington, DC –
The Honorable George W. Bush
President
United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Mr. President,

I write to express my strong concerns with granting permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to Vietnam and supporting Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) without also demanding a significant improvement in Vietnam's record on human rights. I respectfully request that you use your prospective trip to Vietnam to insist that Vietnam make substantive improvements in the protection of religious freedom, free speech, and other basic human rights.

As you know, the recent arrest and detention of a U.S. citizen, Cong Thanh Do, in Vietnam for exercising his U.S. constitutional right to free speech while in the U.S. was troubling. Although Mr. Do was recently released and returned to the U.S., I understand there may be other cases of U.S. citizens held in Vietnam for illegitimate reasons, including four U.S. citizens currently held without charges for over one year.

In addition, I am aware of several Vietnamese nationals who have been imprisoned, put under house arrest, or placed under intense surveillance for simply practicing their religion or speaking out about democracy and human rights in Vietnam. Following his return to the U.S. after his imprisonment in Vietnam, Mr. Do provided us a disturbing list of over 130 Vietnamese nationals and U.S. citizens he believes are currently imprisoned in Vietnam as prisoners of conscience.

I am not alone in my concerns about Vietnam's human rights record. The Department of State, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and various Vietnamese-American groups have documented egregious violations of religious freedom, human rights, and free speech in Vietnam. News accounts advise of extensive efforts to control peaceful expression of political beliefs on the internet through manipulation of that technology as well as arrest of those who advocate peacefully on the internet. In fact, those arrested with Mr. Do this summer remain in custody which should be of strong concern to our country.

For the past two years, the State Department has designated Vietnam a "country of particular concern." In company with Vietnam are such human rights violators as Sudan, Burma, China, Iran, and North Korea. In its 2006 report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom states, "The government of Vietnam continues to commit systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief."

The Committee to Protect Journalists says, "Press conditions in Vietnam largely stagnated in 2005, despite efforts by the country's leaders to project an image of greater openness. Three writers remained imprisoned on antistate charges for material distributed online; print and broadcast media continued to work under the supervision of the government; and attacks on journalists were common."

Furthermore, Congress has consistently registered its concern over Vietnam's human rights record. Congress has passed the Vietnam Human Rights Act, both in the 107th and 108th Congresses, a bill that would limit non-humanitarian assistance to Vietnam unless it shows substantial progress towards protecting the rights of its citizens. Congress has also passed resolution after resolution calling on Vietnam to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, restore civil and human rights, including freedom of speech, information, religion, movement and association, and to guarantee equal protection under the law regardless of religious, political philosophy, or associations.[1] Furthermore, several Members of Congress have repeatedly written to you, the State Department, and the Vietnamese

government urging protection of basic human rights for Vietnamese citizens, especially after specific incidents in which the Vietnamese government cracked down on the free practice of religion, speech, and association.

Despite these repeated attempts by individual Members and the entire U.S. Congress, as well as concerns raised by the State Department, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and several non-governmental organizations, the government of Vietnam has consistently refused to substantively improve the human rights situation in Vietnam.

Given these alarming concerns and Vietnam's strong interest in joining the WTO, Vietnam's interest in obtaining PNTR from the U.S., and your prospective trip to Vietnam, the U.S. is in a unique position to bring about significant improvements in Vietnam. I respectfully request that you use this opportunity to bring the wrongly imprisoned U.S. citizens home, a fair, expeditious and transparent adjudication process for those legitimately arrested, and substantive improvements on human rights for the Vietnamese people.

The United States of America has a long and honorable tradition of safeguarding freedom and human rights throughout the world, especially with our trading partners. No exception should be made for Vietnam.

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Lofgren Opposes Trade Relations Deal with Vietnam

November 13, 2006

Washington, DC – Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose) offered the following statement for the Congressional Record today opposing Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with Vietnam:

"Mr. Speaker, I rise today in opposition to granting permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to Vietnam.

"Just two months ago, the Vietnamese government arrested my constituent, a U.S. citizen, Cong Thanh Do. Mr. Do had posted comments on the internet while at home in San Jose, California advocating that Vietnam undergo a peaceful transition to a multi-party democracy. For exercising his U.S. Constitutional right of free speech, the Vietnamese arrested him and held him in prison for 38 days in Vietnam without charges.

"Other U.S. citizens have been imprisoned in Vietnam for what appear to be political reasons, including the sister of another one of my constituents, Thuong Nguyen 'Cuc' Foshee.

"Although both are free today, I am concerned about hundreds of Vietnamese nationals as well as other U.S. citizens imprisoned in Vietnam.

"The Vietnamese government has repeatedly violated human rights. Hundreds of Vietnamese have been imprisoned, put under house arrest, or placed under intense surveillance for simply practicing their religion or speaking out about democracy and human rights in Vietnam.

"Following his return to the U.S., Mr. Do provided me a disturbing list of over 130 Vietnamese nationals and U.S. citizens he believes are currently imprisoned in Vietnam as prisoners of conscience or harassed by the government for simply speaking about democracy and human rights.

"In addition, groups such as the Human Rights Watch have published reports of 355 Montagnard prisoners of conscience currently imprisoned in Vietnam.

"I am not alone in my concerns about Vietnam's human rights record. The Department of State, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and various Vietnamese-American groups have documented egregious violations of religious freedom, human rights, and free speech in Vietnam.

"I have been a supporter of international trade. But I also know that the Vietnamese Government would correct their behavior in order to perfect a trading relationship with the United States. Given the alarming human rights violations currently underway in Vietnam, it seems a mistake for our country to grant PNTR to Vietnam without requiring that the Vietnamese government make significant improvements in respecting human rights, free speech, and freedom of religion.

"The United States of America has a long and honorable tradition of safeguarding freedom and human rights throughout the world, especially with our trading partners. We should not make an exception for Vietnam.

"At a time when we are spending \$8-\$10 billion a month and shedding the blood of our American servicemen and women proclaiming the cause to be democracy for Iraq, how is it that we can fail to use our mere economic leverage to try to achieve human rights in Vietnam?"

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[1] See S.J.Res. 168 (103rd Congress), H.Con.Res. 216 (103rd Congress), S.Res. 174 (104th Congress), H.Res. 231 (105th Congress), H.Con.Res. 295 (106th Congress), H.Con.Res. 322 (106th Congress), H.Res. 427 (108th Congress), H.Res. 613 (108th Congress), H.Con.Resolution 378 (108th Congress), H.Con.Res. 320 (109th Congress).